



Survey on attitudes to nutrition planning

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The results of a worldwide survey of nutrition planning professionals' attitudes towards nutrition policy are presented. The survey was intended to find out what those involved in nutrition planning perceive to be the causes of hunger and malnutrition, and their views on the effectiveness of the programmes implemented to overcome these problems. The results show that the self-classification of political beliefs is the most clear cut correlate in predicting attitudes towards food and nutrition policy.

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Full results of the survey are available from the authors.

Little is found in the literature regarding the attitudes of people working in the area of nutrition regarding nutrition planning and policy. In an attempt to obtain a better understanding of the nature of the profession, a survey was conducted with the aim of generating a profile of professionals working in the field of applied nutrition and nutrition planning. Understanding who these colleagues are and where they come from seemed desirable, especially if one attempts to classify their opinions in the context of competing or complimentary ideologies.

In mid-1979 a questionnaire was compiled. The questionnaire comprised 48 questions related to attitudes towards nutrition policy, three voluntary questions about social class, political classification and professional behaviour and one open question on perceived major impediments to solving malnutrition in the world. Most of the 48 questions were adapted from Lappé and Collins's book *Food First* and related to what they call the Ten Myths of World Hunger. In general, the areas covered by the survey related to the following important topics: international aid, world malnutrition, the Green Revolution, private industry (mainly food), food imports and exports, solutions to malnutrition, agriculture and malnutrition, malnutrition and poverty, malnutrition and technology, development planning, food production, food self-reliance, and the politics of malnutrition.

The questionnaire was translated into Spanish and French and sent to 728 professionals in 87 countries; 250

replies from 55 countries were finally received (a response rate of 34%). Undoubtedly the respondents represent a biased portion of the total universe of nutrition workers. One should consider this possible bias in interpreting the results presented here.

The characteristics of the sample were as follows. Forty-four per cent resided in the USA, 16% in Latin America and the Caribbean, 14% in the Far East, 12% in Africa and the Middle East and 13% in Europe, Canada and Australasia. Fifty-seven per cent obtained their highest educational degree in the USA, 9% in Latin America and the Caribbean, 5% in the Far East, 4% in Africa and the Middle East and 25% in Europe, Canada, and Australasia. The large majority of the sample were male (73%). The age distribution of the sample was as follows: less than 29 years: 9%; 30-39 years: 38%; 40-49 years: 25%; 50-59 years: 20%; greater than 60 years: 9%. Looking at educational background, 43% had PhDs, 8% held Bachelor's degrees, 23% were Masters and 25% were MDs. Most of the sample (37%) worked in universities, while 25% were connected with government, 17% were with international organizations, 11% came from private organizations and 37% worked for voluntary agencies. When asked to indicate their main activity, 46% replied 'Agriculture/community work', 24% 'Economics/social science', 12% 'Clinical nutrition or laboratory', 8% 'Nutrition planning', and 9% 'Other'. When asked how they spent most of their time, 41% said research, 25% teaching,

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19% extension work and 13% indicated 'Other'.

Following a factor analysis of the 48 questions, nine were concerned mostly with technical interpretations or solutions pertaining to nutrition issues and explained 48% of the total variance. The questions and the distribution of the responses to them are shown in Table 1. The common denominators to these questions are:

- Nutrition intervention and production of more food alone can solve the hunger problem.
- The Western approach to development works fine.
- Ignorance is the major cause of malnutrition.

Ninety-six percent of the respondents disagreed with these premises.

Eight questions led more to political concepts, interpretations or solutions pertaining to the same issues and explained 10% of the total variance. The questions and responses are shown in Table 2. The common denominators to these questions are:

- Structural changes are needed to overcome hunger and malnutrition.
- A redistribution of control over productive resources is needed.

- International food aid demotivates local farmers.

Fifty-six percent of the respondents agreed with these premises.

The answers to the voluntary questions are shown in Table 3. Respondents that had shown quite liberal responses in answering most of the questions were divided on the issue of whether a socialist political orientation was necessary to combat malnutrition successfully; 52% disagreed. In the light of the rest of the answers given showing preference for quite radical changes, this seemed to be contradictory. In the same line, most of the respondents (59%) also seemed to favour gradual changes over more radical changes to reallocate control over productive resources.

Three other areas of controversy that are not new to us in this field came up in the survey too. Respondents were split almost 50-50 on the issues of foreign aid, research and the Green Revolution.

A number of cross-tabulations were done with the data. The more outstanding findings are given below.

No woman in our sample considered herself a conservative, while approximately 1/3 considered themselves moderates and 1/3 leftists. The

Table 1. Questions concerned with technical interpretations.

	Very much agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Very much disagree (%)
Traditional nutrition interventions, if applied in depth and widely, can solve most nutritional problems of the population	5	25	53	16
Hunger in the world will be overcome by concentrating most of our efforts on producing more food	6	12	58	24
The Green Revolution has strengthened the world's food security	2	31	55	12
Mostly ignorance of small farmers is to blame for low food production in the Third World	5	14	48	33
Agricultural modernization is the most important component to be emphasized in rural development	5	27	52	15
Underdeveloped countries need US corporate know-how to improve food availability	3	19	49	29
Increasing food production is mainly a scientific and technological problem	2	17	60	21
Small farms have proven to be more productive per acre than larger farms in most parts of the world	13	52	31	4
Poverty can be eliminated by increased production and by better management — both done best by private enterprise	5	22	54	19

Table 2. Questions concerned with political interpretations.

	Very much agree (%)	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Very much disagree (%)
Political structural changes will most often be necessary to solve the problems of malnutrition.	37	44	17	1
A socialist political orientation is necessary to successfully combat malnutrition.	11	36	42	11
A new seed is like any other technological development: its contribution to social progress depends primarily on who develops it and who controls it.	31	60	8	0
In countries with great inequalities, appeals for national sacrifice are correctly perceived by the poor as a way for the elite to extract yet more wealth through the extra exertion requested of the masses.	20	58	20	1
People will feed themselves. If they are not doing so, one can quite assuredly predict that mighty obstacles are in the way.	26	59	14	1
The traditional approaches of nutritionists - nutrition education, food distribution, food fortification, etc - have served more to self-justify their doing 'something' rather than really helping the poor who suffer from malnutrition	20	47	28	5
International aid is of no real help to the poor if the local food and income maldistribution factor is ignored and no corrective measures for the latter are built into the interventions to be financed.	42	51	6	1
Most food aid has had a negative impact on local grain prices, demotivating local farmers to grow the same grains	19	53	27	1

single category most mentioned by women in terms of impediments to improve hunger and malnutrition in the world had to do with resources and wealth maldistribution, whereas for males, the most often cited impediment was rigid political structures.

Those who considered themselves conservative came from the older-age groups while leftists came from the younger-aged categories. The liberal category skewed the entire sample left of centre.

In the question regarding the im-

pediments to progress, the older-age groups focused more on technical causes of hunger and malnutrition. The younger-age groups mentioned more often imperialism/underdevelopment as the main obstacles.

There was a tendency for developed world respondents to list rigid political structures as being responsible for blocking efforts to improve nutrition, while Third World respondents concentrated more on phenomena such as imperialism and underdevelopment as the explanatory factors.

Table 3. Voluntary questions.

How would you classify yourself, politically?

Conservative: 38% Moderate: 19% Liberal: 55% Leftist: 23%

Which social class do you consider you belong to?

Lower: 0% Lower-middle: 4.5% Middle: 46% Upper-middle: 44% Upper: 4.5%

Do you think you behave in full accordance with the positions you have taken in answering the above questions?

Yes: 51% No: 3% Partially (with contradictions): 46%

What do you think are the major impediments to progress in solving hunger and malnutrition in the world?

Social injustice: 10% Resource and wealth maldistribution: 12%
 Programmes of limited objectives/lack of political commitment: 12%
 Imperialism/underdevelopment: 14% Rigid political structures: 18%
 Other (mostly related to more technical impediments): 30%

Of the few individuals who classified themselves as conservative, almost 2/3 had MD degrees. Physicians also felt that social injustice was the major impediment to overcoming malnutrition in the world. Bachelor's degree holders more often chose imperialism/underdevelopment as an explanation. The other groups most often chose rigid political structures as the primary cause.

Sixty-seven percent of the more conservative individuals chose the categories under 'Other' (primarily a combination of technically-oriented reasons) as major impediments as compared to less than 20% of the leftists who did so; they chose the more social and political constraints.

Nutritionists and biological and physical scientists were significantly more conservative than the norm. Social scientists and economists tended to be more to the left in their self-classification. The latter also tended to list more often impediments from the social/political realm.

Slightly fewer than expected university employees classified themselves politically to the right of centre with a larger number placing themselves left of centre. In the case of voluntary agency employees, almost 30% classified themselves as leftists.

Younger individuals, females, those who did not work for government organizations and those who did not study in the USA or were not US nationals, proved to be the most liberal towards the nine questions aimed at technical interpretations or solutions to world nutrition problems. None of the conservatives, but 67% of the self-labeled leftists, very much disagreed with these statements.

Regarding the second set of questions that assumed sociopolitical determinants and corrective measures for world hunger problems, again non-US nationals were significantly more likely to be in agreement with these statements. Females and the younger in the sample also fell into this more liberal category, while PhDs and bachelor degree holders were least likely to agree and respondents of lower-middle class extraction were more likely to disagree with the con-

tent of the eight more political questions, which would make them less liberal.

In summary, the self-classification of political beliefs proved to be the most clear-cut correlate to predict responses to the 17 questions singled out in this article, and explains 58% of the total variance.

With regard to the original objective of the research presented here – the description of a significant sample of the emergent profession of nutrition planning – the conclusions are straightforward.

First, there appear to be two clear schools of scientific/political behaviour in our sample. One holds a more moderate, but still generally liberal, set of views regarding the failure of modern technology in resolving world hunger and nutrition problems. The holders of these views seem mostly to come from the USA. A second, more liberal group, with a relatively more radical perspective on the failure of technology citing political causes as the root of hunger, has been educated or comes from Western Europe or the Commonwealth.

Second, there is no single profession that can be typified as a breeding ground for nutrition planners. They come from areas that reflect the multifactorial nature of the food chain and the nutrition system. The fabric which seems to hold them together is one which is more ideological than discipline-oriented. So far, they are primarily educated in the USA and Western Europe, reflecting the Western World's deepening concern with the study of the distribution of food. The Socialist Bloc nations apparently feel that they know the answers to food distribution problems.

Third, the middle-class, relatively young, primarily male nature of the survey sample reflects well the Western technology or development set. While the European trained and/or native group tends to be more to the left in their attitudes than their counterparts in the USA, both groups are decidedly liberal and of the opinion that social structural changes are the starting point for solving hunger and malnutrition in the world.

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'No single profession can be typified as a breeding ground for nutrition planners'
